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EVOLUTION AND LITERATURE

In one of the quaint and charming volumes of M. Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Grasshopper*, is a passage which shall serve as an introduction to this essay. Fabre has been speaking of the musical instrument used by the white-faced decticus to produce his song, and of how few the creatures are which sing. "Above the bird, . . . [they] roar and bray and grunt, until we come to man. . . . Below the bird, they croak or are silent." Then he recalls the interesting fact that the insect, in fact, belongs ". . . with those primitive races whose records are inscribed in our coal seams. It is one of the first that mingled the sounds of life with the vague murmuring of inert things. It was singing before the reptile had learned to breathe."

"This shows," concludes the naturalist, "from the mere point of view of sound, the futility of those theories of ours which try to explain the world by the automatic evolution of progress nascent in the primitive cell. All is yet dumb; and already the insect is stridulating as correctly as it does to-day. Phonetics start with an apparatus which the ages will hand down to one another, without changing any part of it. Then, though the lungs have appeared, we have silence, save for the heavy breathing of the nostrils. But lo, one day, the Frog croaks; and soon, with no preparation, there are mingled with this hideous concert the trills of the Quail, and the whistled stanzas of the Thrush and the Warbler's musical strains. The larynx in its highest form has come into existence. What will the late-comers do with it? The Ass and the Wild Boar give us our reply. We find nothing worse than marking time . . . until one last bound brings us to man's own larynx. In the genesis of sounds it is impossible to talk authoratively of a steady progression. . . . We find nothing but a riddle whose solution does not lie in the virtues of the cell alone, that easy pillow for whoso has not the courage to search deeper."

It is characteristic of Fabre's keenly scientific mind that he is able thus so definitely to recognize the inadequacy of a theory which for the most part he accepts to explain all the phe-

nomena he observes about him. On the basis of this theory he formulates his conception of the earth's history; and on the basis of it he formulates, too, his history of the living things which inhabit the earth. But he is careful. Because he has explained some things he does not, therefore, know all things, by the same token. Never for a moment does his faith in a particular mode of thought blind him to the existence of facts which he cannot understand. He sees the multiplicity of forms and events; but he is so sane, and he regards life so steadily, that he does not, even involuntarily, exclude from his consideration what does not happen to conform to a preconceived explanation. Fabre is a man who has used his mind well.

The theory of evolution has thoroughly permeated our universe. Those of us, especially, who did not undergo the struggles which attended its first introduction, and who have been taught it in the schools as naturally our fathers were taught their theories, are not often aware of the real extent to which we think in terms of evolutionist doctrine. We forget that our ancestors conceived of the world in a different form; and we cannot by any stretch of the imagination persuade ourselves that others yet to come may discard our system as useless. Our Reason, from the past experience of the race, may assure us that such a change is possible, but the probability of that change cannot be for us at present a vital reality. Evolution, therefore, is the form of our thinking. It is our point of orientation.

One of the great contributions which John Stuart Mill made to modern thought was his analysis of the relation of cause and effect, and his establishment of canons by which that relation might be tested. He showed very definitely wherein the experience of two events, the one before and the other after, might be interpreted as cause and effect. Mill's analysis and his canons are open to all who care to understand them. Nevertheless, many persons go on making false causal inductions, some of them very silly indeed, like most of our popular signs and superstitions about the weather and about Fortune. In a similar way, the theory of evolution is ignorantly abused. So prone are we to use this theory, often unconsciously from mere force of habit, and so accustomed are we to find our explanations of facts

verified, that we forget the principles upon which the validity of the theory is based. We come to regard the idea of evolution as one inherent in the nature of things, and to consider it a quality of a ripe apple. We fail to remember that the theory of evolution is after all only a mode of thinking, and that it is no sounder in a given instance than the weakest link in our chain of observation and thought. Consequently we make many inductions which have no justification whatever. We overwork a capable method of solution, and do not see "the futility of those theories of ours" in certain applications that we make of them. Often we read into a group of facts—sometimes we have not even facts—implications which are unsound, and formulate an interpretation on an evolutionistic basis which has no truth in it.

II

The fundamental purpose of the theory of evolution is exposition, for the theory is the outgrowth of a desire for the explanation of how certain things came about. It is concerned primarily with the study of the causes and processes of change. The individual elements in a given chronological series have no intrinsic value, but are interesting only in so far as they help in the study of a particular evolutionary process. If an individual unit secures attention to itself, it does so because it contributes in some special way to the knowledge of the series by supplying a hitherto unknown step in the process, or by requiring some special explanation to bring it into harmony with the general course of development.

The emphasis upon exposition, and the subordination of the constituent units to the series of which they are parts, are matters of much importance in thinking of the theory of evolution as applied to literature.

It is a long time since Matthew Arnold set forth his three interpretations of poetry in his famous essay,—the historical, the personal, and the real; and, regarding the last only as worthy of consideration, proposed his equally famous "touchstone" method for testing what is good from what is bad. Many critics have laughed at Arnold's attempt to establish an absolute criterion of poetic values, and have pointed out that, when all is said

and done, there are only two distinct ways of looking at literature. One is the historical, lending interest to a literary work because of its place in the general history of literature, like the odes of Cowley, or in the career of an individual author, like Wordsworth's tragedy of *The Borderers*. The other is personal, lending interest to literature because of some appeal which, like Browning's star, it makes to a given reader.

Now there is no doubt that many things which Arnold wrote were indeed futile and vague. But it must be admitted, at the same time, that in thus stating those alternatives Arnold has put the proposition right clearly, and has pointed out the line of cleavage which must determine our inclination to one side or the other. That is, to state the question in terms of the evolution theory, Was Arnold right in believing that a genuine interest in literature arises from an appreciation of a literary production as a unit, rather than from a desire to know the place of the production in the time series of which it is a part? The answer, I believe, inheres in the nature of literature itself.

Whatever may be our definition of the term, literature has two qualities common to all the arts. It has, namely, a certain substantiality of matter, by which we mean that we recognize in literature truth as we have learned truth from our experience and our generalizations; by which we mean, also, that before a piece of writing can, for us as individuals, be called literature it must reflect an experience intelligible to us and having elements that we can appreciate as common, at least in imagination, with our own. Literature has, too, a certain excellence of form—not a technical excellence, necessarily, in conforming to a set of rules of composition or in following any formulæ prescribed for various literary genres (witness Shakespeare's disregard of the classical unities in *Romeo and Juliet*)—but an excellence of the kind which, irrespective of thought conveyed, affords satisfaction in and of itself. Truth and Beauty, to use time-honored phrases, literature has; and, to whatever degree we may, as our power of discrimination increases, narrow the range of what we are willing to admit within the limits of our definition, these qualities literature will always have.

Literature, as an art, endures because it fulfills these two requirements of substance and form, because it is—whatever else it may be—primarily a source of æsthetic pleasure. It may be incidentally didactic; it must be fundamentally, though not designedly, moral. But in order to survive, to be called literature, it must, first of all, give pleasure. That was a true saying of Arnold Bennett's where he remarked that literature "does not survive for any ethical reason." (It is a question whether many things survive for this reason.) But, he says, it survives because it is a source of pleasure to a few people who are "intensely and passionately interested" in it; who, "engaged in an eternal process of rediscovery," are ever seeking for the things which are "right." And, he concludes, "the 'right things' are right solely because the passionate few *like* reading them."

The process by which the "right things" are discovered and eternally rediscovered—by which, of course, Mr. Bennett means the permanent interest in literary classics—is the same for all works of literature. It is a purely experimental process. Those readers who take keen and genuine pleasure in reading, to quote again, are "for ever making new researches, for ever practising on themselves. They learn to understand themselves. They learn to know what they want." And when they find a book pleasurable, "no chill silence of the street-crowds will affect their conviction that the book is good and permanent." By experience, then, and desire for the renewal of pleasure, they learn to search out and preserve through successive years the things which by their form and matter are made in some way significant for them, as being among the treasures which the earth affords.

The result of such an experimental process, together with the traditional reputation accruing to the works so discovered and enjoyed, is a valuing of those works for their own sake, irrespective of author, time, place, and circumstances of composition, irrespective of what preceded and what followed them in the way of literary influences and tendencies,—a valuing of them because their source of appeal is resident in themselves. There can seem to be no doubt that, in answer to the question proposed above, the "passionate few" (by whom, most certainly, real literature is kept alive) would unanimously respond that the interest in

literature will eternally arise from enjoyment of individual authors and productions rather than from an intellectual desire to trace an evolution by means of a time series of literary units.

In thus emphasizing the importance of the individual unit rather than the series, I do not, however, wish to be misunderstood. I believe it is true that in our so constant use of the theory of evolution in the many phases of our life and thought we have been accustomed to overlook this limitation of the theory in its relation to literature, which I have been endeavoring to point out. Works of literature are not read with the same kind of enjoyment with which the biologist studies a crayfish to round out his conception of the development of a particular life form. And they never will be. The enjoyment of literature is not an expository process; the theory of evolution is. That is the distinction I wish to make.

At the same time I should like to guard against certain implications which might seem naturally to follow from such a statement. I do not desire to be charged with saying that the unit, to which I attach so much importance, is necessarily an altogether isolated unit. I do not mean that to enjoy literature one must single out, say a poem, and that he must shut himself up in a room with it, and forget all the other poems he may ever have read, and cut himself off (were it possible) from all that he has ever thought and known before of the history and experience of his race. It is not a corollary to my thesis to maintain that, because one enjoys a poem as an individual unit—George Herbert's *The Collar*, for instance—one therefore ignores totally the relation of this unit to the whole series of religious poems of the school of Donne, of which it is a part; and that he separates it in his mind from the more general field of human knowledge which it may be his good fortune to possess.

III

The development of the scientific spirit which has so characterized our age has resulted from the desire of man to know what things are like and to discover the processes by which they came from what they were in the past to what they are now. These two elements are about equally important in our thought. Im-

mediately, when we have learned what something is, we inquire into its history; and frequently our knowledge of its past is our most direct way to a knowledge of what it is. Examination and evolution are not separated in our minds, and we think in terms of evolution quite as much as we make analyses of what is within the direct range of our experience. Investigation and interpretation are the functions of a scientific mind.

History, then, using the term in its broadest meaning as an organized interpretation of past events—synonymous in a certain sense with the theory of evolution applied to a particular set of facts—is a very important part of our mental life. We do not study the present formations of the earth alone; we inquire into the record of its former conditions. We do not content ourselves with an understanding of the present biological data; we interpret in order to know the data of the past. We write the history of all elements of our experience from the point of view of tracing their development. Among these elements we write also the history of literature.

Writers on literature have frequently incorporated the idea of evolution into the titles of their essays and books, and many who have used the simple word *history* have written with the same implications. There seems to be no doubt in the minds of these critics and historians that they are altogether justified in taking for granted the theory of evolution as a fit and proper basis upon which to construct their interpretations of literary facts. They seem never to have stopped to inquire whether the individual literary works and authors are really related in the way which we call "evolutionary." They have assumed that causality, continuity, and development are true relations existing through all and in all literary productions, and that their only duty as historians is to discover and point out these relations. Now a question arises as to whether the assumption is warranted. Or have they been doing what M. Fabre says many scientists have done, have they been trying "to explain the world by the automatic evolution of progress nascent in the primitive cell"—in this instance, a folk ballad-dance or something of the kind—without being sure that the premise which underlies all their explanation is sound?

I believe that we have greatly overworked the theory of evolution in much that we have said about the history of literature. In saying so, I do not think it necessary in the least to deny that in literature as in other forms of art—dress, cookery, architecture—there may, viewing the entire extent of activity, have been progress; and that the elements in a time series of literary units may, taken broadly, be related as to cause and continuity. The houses we live in to-day are an evolution from the primitive structures inhabited by our forebears; our dress is a development from the rude skins worn by our ancestors in their uncivilized state. Our literature is related (whether by “automatic evolution,” is a problem) to the crude beginnings of savages as they chanted their songs around the camp-fire. I can readily see in all these forms of art something more than just a time series of events. There has undoubtedly been an evolution in the real sense of the word.

But granting all this, I still think we push the application of the evolution theory beyond reasonable limits. And I question whether, except in thinking of a long series of facts and in thinking of them in a very general way, we are justified in using the theory as a basis for explaining the relationship between them. In two points, especially, I am skeptical about the application of the theory of evolution in the history of the arts. The time series, I am willing to admit, can be determined with a fair degree of accuracy; although even chronology, the only obvious relation between the units, many times rests on generalizations and inferences from their varying degrees of complexity or from what seems to be a causal relation between them, so that the whole structure of the theory is like that of the old conception of the earth, which rests on the shoulders of Atlas, who stands on a turtle, and so on down. It is all right, if only the turtle has solid footing. I concede, however, the accuracy of the time series. Nor do I see any need for doubting, either, the continuity which appears to exist in the series. But as to causality and progress, I am often unable to see them as a part of the relationship existing between two units or groups of units; for what is later is not invariably better, from any standard of judgment that can be set up, than what was earlier; and the causes

which have operated to produce the changes are too subtle and too numerous to permit of a formulation of them into statements of laws.

An illustration of these two truths is afforded by the history of dress. The fashions of the last five decades can be arranged into accurate chronological order. And most certainly the forms of dress to-day are a continuation in nature and in function of those former days. I cannot discover, however, that the changing styles are related in a causal way; nor can I see that the later ones are either more beautiful (the styles of the present will soon look strange and uncouth) or more serviceable than the earlier. That is, it seems to me that two of the four component parts which are embraced in the term *evolution* are not present, inasmuch as there is no constantly operating cause which is responsible for the changes, unless it be the dictates of fashionable dressmakers; and inasmuch as there is no permanent gain in beauty or serviceability. The history of dress, therefore, is not to be written in terms of evolution, unless the discussion cover a long period of time. Rather it is to be written as a record of units related only in time and continuity. Long sleeves, short sleeves, fur trimmings, bead trimmings; varieties of color in seasons of popularity—plum, raspberry, sand, brass—if there be causal and progressive relations between these succeeding styles, I fail to see them. To speak in specific terms about “evolution” of dress during the last fifty years or any similar period is to read into the fashions relations which are not there.

In a like manner, if we worked less with the theory of evolution in dealing with the shorter periods of literary history, and were content with statements of facts, we should have less ridiculous and far-fetched explanations of the course of events than those which clutter up most of our accounts. Ruskin criticized severely the “pathetic fallacy” common to many of the makers of literature, by which he meant the tendency to project into external things, particularly into various aspects of nature, the thoughts and emotions of the human soul. He was not averse to such a projection if it were done as a figure of speech; and many of our best descriptions of nature are just such projections, into the outer world, of the inward emotions, as Wordsworth’s

famous sonnet on the view from Westminster Bridge. But to do more than that, to be sincere in thus reading into nature what can be felt only by a human being, is, to use the mildest term, the essence of sentimentality. In a similar way many historians of literature are subject to a kind of "pathetic fallacy" when they bring to bear on the interpretation of, say, a half-century of literature the whole pressure of their evolutionary thinking as they have learned it from our scientific age and from our scientific teachers. They make the history of literature the record of the development of an organic, self-conscious, onward-moving activity explicable by "the automatic evolution of progress," without recognizing the all-important truth that what they call "evolution" is their own contribution to the time series of facts before them, and that in many cases the contribution is not warranted.

The course of the English novel in the nineteenth century comes to me with considerable force as an illustration of the principle I have just stated, for recently I had occasion to read most of the histories of the nineteenth-century novel. Almost all of them have one point of view. They take Scott and Dickens and Thackeray and George Eliot and Hardy and Stevenson, and trace the "evolution" from romance to realism and from realism back to romance. Now, if there is indeed evolution, there must be, in addition to the fact that there is a succession of those authors in time, and to the fact that all these writers were using the same medium of expression (chronology and continuity)—in addition to these facts, there must be a causal relation between the successive writers and a definite progress toward perfection. These last two relations of progress and cause I cannot discover in the novel of the last century.

In order to speak of the evolution of the novel of the nineteenth century, we must be able to mark the successive steps toward the accomplishment of the end. It must be clear that the novels of Dickens and Thackeray were better novels than those of Scott; that those of George Eliot and Hardy were better than those of Dickens and Thackeray; that those of Stevenson were better than those of Eliot and Hardy; that the sociological novels of the last decade were an improvement still; and that, forsooth,

the novels arising from the great war are the greatest novels the English-speaking world has ever produced. Or, limiting the test of progress merely to works of similar kind, it must be clear that Stevenson is a greater writer of fiction than Scott; that Archibald Marshall is a greater novelist than Anthony Trollope. All of which is, of course, untrue. There is no truth, as one surveys the history of literature, which stands out more distinctly than the truth that what is later is not necessarily better than what was earlier. In such a case Fielding and Jane Austen would be elementary and insignificant beyond reckoning with.

The relation of cause is no more evident than that of progress. Sir Walter Scott, driven from poetic narrative by the sudden popularity of Byron, turned the reading public from the almost exhausted terror romance to historical romance. After a quarter of a century, the public, surfeited with the novels of Scott, or rather with the insipid romances of his followers, welcomed with joy the new work of Dickens and Thackeray. The only causal relation, however, between Scott and the realistic school which followed him is that historical romance was worked out—just as after a long while, long sleeves for my lady's gown go out of fashion and short sleeves come in. Nor were the works of Stevenson an evolution from those of the realistic writers, except that realism had grown old—except that "The Limits of Realism in Fiction" had been reached, as Mr. Gosse said in an essay in 1898: ". . . . Wherever I look I see the novel ripe for another reaction. The old leaders will not change. . . . But it is my conviction that the limits of realism have been reached; and that we ought now to be on the lookout to welcome a school of novelists with a totally new aim." The reaction was even then in progress. The novels of Stevenson were making their influence felt; soon realism as a popular favorite was dead. Then followed romance, with Weyman and Anthony Hope and the rest, all writing romance whether they would or not—because that year large pockets on my lady's coat happened to be in fashion. Presently romance died out, and the novel became sociological, as may be seen in Mr. Churchill's transformation from the author of *Richard Carvel* and *The Crisis* to the author of *The Inside of the Cup* and *A Far Country*.

Professor Phelps, speaking of the influence of Stevenson, makes a most illuminating remark: "One man," he says, "ap-

pearing at just the right moment when readers were either weary or disgusted with the reigning sovereign, Realism [Zola, for instance, and his sort] toppled him over with the sheer audacity of genius." It seems to me that Professor Phelps has expressed well just what it is that happens when a change in fiction comes. It was not that Stevenson "evolved" from the school of realists; he was simply a man of sufficient genius to make his power known and effective. What he created was something new. He set a fashion — being the man he was, and the times being the times they were — which was related in no causal way to what had preceded it except that it was new and the other was old.

It may be that my analogy between literature and fashions in dress is a superficial one, and perhaps a little impertinent. But I am satisfied that often it is a more modest and more suitable explanation of the course of events than the more pretentious theory of evolution. I may seem reactionary in these scientific days thus to lay aside a system of interpreting the historical facts of literature for one which is so obviously less well regulated, and which does not conform to our insistent demand for orderliness and completeness of explanation. To revert from the theory of evolution as our basis of interpretation to one which must often omit the elements of cause and development is admittedly a step backward. That is, unless the end in view is Truth, and unless we are willing to take literary history as we actually find it, without making it over to fit our preconceived interpretation.

I may say in conclusion that I do not deny the possibility of applying the theory of evolution to a period of literature, even to the illustration I have been using, the novel of the nineteenth century. What I wish to emphasize is that the application of the theory must always be tested; that we must never rest content on the assumption of progress "nascent" in any literary form without a careful examination into the actuality of all four relations which make up the theory—Time, Continuity, Causality, Progress. If we are to go on in our desire to know the Truth, we can never be willing to settle back upon what we have already conceived to be the Truth, "that easy pillow for whoso has not the courage to search deeper."

JOHN CLARK JORDAN.

Fayetteville, Ark.